

Demand for French immersion rises amid shortage of qualified teachers - Collège Churchill now being led by English-speaking principal after failed search for Francophone replacement

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Francophone schools are separate from French immersion programs, where instruction is offered in French for second language learners. (Photofusion/Shutterstock)

A Winnipeg French milieu school is being led by a principal who isn't a francophone after a search failed to find a suitable replacement for his predecessor.

On Monday, Ryan Hughes took over Collège Churchill, a Grade 7 to 12 French milieu school inside Churchill High School.

Hughes is serving in his third year as principal of the high school. The milieu, which has its own dedicated space inside the building and staff, was previously led by another principal.

The Winnipeg School Division said it first started looking for a replacement last spring but by November still hadn't found a qualified candidate despite an aggressive recruiting process that involved an out-of-province search. It decided to have Hughes lead both schools while hiring a francophone vice-principal he'll work alongside with.

"We're going on a journey where we're slightly changing things," said Hughes, who is the parent of two kids who've been in French immersion.

"I'm a strong advocate for the program and really believe in it strongly."

Intensive program

The milieu is a distinct section of the school and has its own intercom system, office and physical space.

Hughes said it is more intensive than a regular French immersion program because students take 21 of 30 high school credits instead of the 14 required for regular immersion.



Ryan Hughes is the new principal of Collège Churchill. The milieu, which has its own dedicated space inside Churchill High School and staff, was previously led by another principal. (CBC)

Kat Patenaude's daughter is in Grade 10 at the school and said she's concerned about having an anglophone principal.

"Either we have a situation where they are not adequately funding for that position or there are truly a lack of candidates available in the pool. And if that's the case ... that should concern all Manitobans because we are a multilingual province, but we were born as a French and English-speaking province."

Schools across Canada [are struggling to find bilingual teachers](#). "It certainly is difficult," said Celia Caetano-Gomes, superintendent of education services in the Winnipeg School Division.

9 per cent enrolment spike

The province said student enrolment increased by nine per cent in Français and 36 per cent in French immersion programs between 2008 and 2018.

Caetano-Gomes said finding instructors with the language competency needed has been a challenge that's now spilling over into school administration.

"Every year we are looking on average of trying to fill 31 candidates in advance prior to the school year starting."

Caetano-Gomes maintained learning won't be compromised at Collège Churchill.

"The curriculum and the learning that happens in the classrooms is going to be continuing at the same level of French in following the requirements from the

department of education, so the change in the administrative structure won't impact the learning, the day-to-day, it won't impact the credits that students will achieve."

Despite the shortage, she said the division currently has 225 French immersion teachers, 20 educational assistants and 22 administrators on staff in 18 French immersion schools.

Patenaude's daughter Sophie Eyamie said she surveyed students in every grade and put together a document with recommendations for a school charter.



Sophie Eyamie is a Grade 10 student at Collège Churchill. (CBC)

She said the appointment of an anglophone, albeit in an administrative role, concerns her as a student.

"I think it is still a threat to the milieu environment and the more that we just sort of let these sort of things happen, the more of the integrity of the French side that we lose and the more of the bilingualism we lose in Manitoba in general."

The board of directors of Canadian Parents for French Manitoba said provinces need to improve recruitment efforts and work together to come up with a pan-Canadian solution.

"The government of Manitoba can also help address the situation by maybe recognizing foreign credentials, for example, so that our new Canadians who have the language skills are able to teach in the language and there needs to be some flexibility there," said Michael Hudon, board president.